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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the negative messages that Appalachian students receive about pursuing a college education. Appalachian culture has traditionally valued loyalty to family and community, hard work, self-reliance, strong sense of religion, and resistance to change. While most of these values seem positive, they may be a factor in perpetuating negative perceptions of higher education. A survey was completed by 127 students at 3 colleges in southern Ohio and eastern Kentucky; 91 respondents were considered to be Appalachian and had lived in Appalachia from birth to age 11. The results indicate that Appalachian students had been exposed to discouraging messages regarding the pursuit of higher education. Half of Appalachian students reported being expected to do extra work that kept them from their schoolwork. Other frequent responses included being accused of "acting better" than others who did not attend college, being ignored when talking about college experiences, being told to not waste time on college, receiving dirty looks when talking about college, and being told that they would never complete a degree. Among the other findings: half of reported messages came from family members; women were much more likely than men to receive discouraging messages; Appalachian respondents tended toward internal locus of control; and discouraging messages have not decreased in recent years. (Contains 30 references and the survey questionnaire.) (SV)

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Abstract

This study is a preliminary glimpse into the negative messages that Appalachian individuals receive about pursuing a college education. Several discouraging messages have been identified by the author and co-presenters based on personal experiences and observations, and there seems to be evidence that others have received these messages as well. Discouraging messages seem to be more often directed at women and by family members.

Rationale

Education is becoming increasingly more necessary in today's changing world (Harris, 1998). Unfortunately, many in our country are not encouraged and possibly even actively discouraged from pursuing a college degree. The population of interest here is the residents of geographic areas known as Appalachia. *Appalachia* is defined by the federal Appalachian Regional Commission as a mountain range that extends 13 states and 200,000 square miles, running from northeast Mississippi to southwest New York (Appalachian Regional Commission; Wenger, 1998). The particular area covered in this study includes parts of Kentucky and southern Ohio. The specific counties in these states which are considered Appalachian were obtained from the Appalachian Regional Commission's website (www.arc.gov). The author and two of the co-presenters for this project would be considered Appalachian, having grown up and lived most of their lives in the southern Ohio area with multi-generational ties to Appalachian regions. The third co-presenter has been living in the southern Ohio area for over twenty years, but would not be considered of Appalachian descent. The impetus for much of this project was the experiences and/ or observations of the author and co-presenters.

Influences on the cultural perceptions of education

Appalachia is often portrayed using stereotypes that emphasize the lack of education and slow pace of the culture. The assumption seems to be that slow paced lifestyles reflect slow-witted or "backward" individuals (Cummings, 1999). However, while historically books and formal education may have been rare in Appalachian regions, they were often highly prized by the pioneer leaders (Higgs, Manning & Miller, 1995). But as the harsh conditions and the lives of hard work in the coal, agricultural, and timber industries took their toll, the descendants of these settlers eventually replaced the value of education with a strong work ethic, self-reliance, and commitment to family ("Appalachian people and culture"; Ergood & Kuhre, 1991; Higgs, et al., 1995). It has been argued that because of the geographic remoteness of the Appalachian area, its culture has changed very little over the recent decades (Wilburn, falcon.jmu.edu) thus the move away from valuing education might still be considered a characteristic of the culture. It could be said also that the reverse is true: educational systems do not value or confirm the Appalachian culture. In fact, James Branscome, director of the Appalachian Regional Commission youth leadership programs, contended "no institution of American society is more divorced from Appalachia than the higher educational system which resides within it" (Ergood & Kuhre, 1991, P.3).

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Montgomery (2000) argues that the age-old explanation of the relatively slow-changing Appalachia as isolation or geographical remoteness is unsatisfactory. Instead, he believes that the slow-paced culture is positively derived from strong cultural and traditional identity, social solidarity, and cohesiveness. Characteristics of the culture include having strong roots, being intensely loyal to one's family, keeping outsiders at a distance, being attached to one's geographic region, having a strong sense of religion and personal values, and being less open to change than other areas (Baldwin, 1996; Montgomery, 2000; Pack, 2000; Shinn, 1999). Ironically, while most of these characteristics such as attachment to family and place and self-reliance seem positive, they might be a factor in perpetuating the negative perceptions of education.

Influences on the perceptions of individuals regarding education

Research has identified several variables thought to have an impact on an individuals' decision to pursue higher education: social variables, cultural determinants, locus of control beliefs, availability of financial assistance, and general preparation for college (Harris, 1998). Among the social factors are variables such as parental influence, extended family support, peer support, and the presence of role models. Of particular interest to this study are cultural determinants, family influences mixed with peer support, and individual loci of control.

Cultural determinants. While the Appalachian culture may be changing slowly, many of the unfortunate social and economic environments have remained constant (Shinn, 1999). Income levels in Appalachia fall short of the national average; in Appalachian Ohio counties alone, twenty-four of the twenty-nine counties have poverty levels above the Ohio average (Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools, 2000). Teenage pregnancy rates in Appalachian areas are above the national average, and the literacy rates are low (Shinn, 1999). Branscome (1991) reported that the dropout rate in Appalachian schools is almost double that of the already high national average. Research indicates that children who grow up in disadvantaged homes are no less loved but are more often deprived of intellectual stimulation than their counterparts from higher socioeconomic groups (Harris & Liebert, 1987). While certainly not all Appalachian homes can be considered disadvantaged, the economic environment described above does suggest that a fair proportion of Appalachian homes especially single-parent homes (Jones, 1991) might fall into that category.

Family and peer influence. The family plays an influential role in the lives of Appalachian individuals since cultural values and assumptions are transferred indirectly from the culture to the child via a primary caregiver (Harris & Liebert, 1987). Russian psychologist Vygotsky, in his sociocultural theory, promoted the belief that social interaction, particularly parent to child, was necessary for children to acquire the ways of thinking and behaving that make up a community's culture (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992). Within the Appalachian culture as with most cultures, there are implicit assumptions about the relationship between parent and child. Appalachian parents often do not give direct, continuous, verbal guidance but rather expect that the children will pick up on their nonverbal signals about behavior that is expected from them (Best, 1979). Children are taught shame at an early age (Harris & Liebert, 1987) and are likely to sense disapproval without being verbally admonished; therefore, some of the messages regarding the pursuit of a college education might be nonverbal.

Parental expectations whether verbalized or not have a significant impact on a child's academic success (Seginer, 1982). Children who consistently show superior academic ability tend to have parents who value education, create stimulating learning environments in the home, help with homework, and communicate often with teachers (Connors & Epstein, 1996; Ginsburg & Bronstein, 1993). Seginer (1982) notes that "high

achieving children come from families who have high expectations for them" (p. 4). Also, Hsiao (1992) found that "parents, siblings, and friends who have no experience of college or its rewards may be non-supportive or even obstructionist" (p. 1) toward those who pursue a college degree. In Appalachian families, there appears to be a general recognition that formal education is necessary for achievement, but many considered schooling to be merely a substitute for hard work (Ford, 1991). Thus, with the possibility of a culture that devalues education and a family life that does not actively encourage it, Appalachian children might be receiving nonverbal and even verbal messages that suggest that the pursuit of higher education is an unacceptable or unnecessary goal. The first research question relates to the types of negative messages regarding the pursuit of higher education that might be present in the culture:

RQ1 Which types of discouraging messages regarding higher education are most commonly encountered by students from Appalachian cultures?

Related to this research question is the suggestion that the family is the source of most of the negative messages:

H1 Students receive more discouraging messages from their own family members than from other sources within their culture.

Based on the idea of strong traditional values, women are often placed in stereotypical roles within male-dominated families in the Appalachian culture (Appalachian Women's Alliance; Egan, 1993; Joyner, 1993). The Appalachian Women's Alliance was founded based on the belief that Appalachian women are challenged by isolation; chronic economic struggles; inadequate educational, health care, and social systems; high incidences of domestic violence; and traditional roles based on male dominance (Appalachian Women's Alliance). Bem (1993) argued that in cultures where values are slower to change, gender-linked associations are usually so pervasive that parents and teachers must work especially hard to keep young children from absorbing them. According to the characteristics of the Appalachian culture, it appears that women might be more often the recipients of negative messages regarding the pursuit of personal achievement. The second hypothesis is as follows:

H2 Although both will have encountered discouraging messages regarding college, female students from Appalachian cultures will have encountered more discouraging messages than male students from Appalachian cultures.

Locus of control as an influence. Of course many individuals, both men and women, from Appalachian regions do attend institutions of higher education. Shinn (1999) reports that many more students from the Appalachian area of Berea, Kentucky are attending college than were attending a few years ago. This finding leads to the question of why they are in college if the culture seems to discourage the pursuit of a degree.

Locus of control (LOC) is a concept that is based on whether an individual "believes that his own behavior, skill, or internal dispositions determine what reinforcements he receives" (Rotter, 1966, p.4). The concept refers to the mastery of one's own environment (Rubin, 1993). While mainstream America tends to favor and value achievement, self-betterment, and a mastery over nature (characteristics related to the idea of an internal locus of control), many Appalachians tend to have a passive resignation to their situation in life (Ford, 1991). While they might want their children to

have more advantages in life, only the most economically secure seem to feel that it is within their power to direct the course of events to lead to this desired goal (Ford, 1991). Although this portrayal tends to favor an external locus of control explanation, one could argue that those who make the decision to attend college seem to have personal qualities that demonstrate an internal locus of control. Thus, the third research hypothesis is as follows:

H3 *Students from Appalachian cultures who are attending college will have an internal locus of control.*

While research concerning traditions of the Appalachian regions seem to indicate more of a traditional family framework in which women are the homemakers and nurtures and men are the primary breadwinners and disciplinarians (Egan, 1993; Joyner, 1993), possibly the traditional viewpoint is changing since more and more Appalachians are attending college (Shinn, 1999). Ergood and Kuhre (1991) claim that the media is an important factor in Appalachian change. They argue that during the recently fought "war on poverty," Appalachians grew less content with their conditions because they saw themselves depicted so negatively in the media. Ford (1991) also cited a study in which the majority of Appalachian community leaders said that they would like for their own children, male or female (although less of a percentage for females), to obtain a college education. Based on the possibility that the cultural mindsets are changing, the fourth and final hypothesis is as follows:

H4 *Fewer discouraging messages regarding college will have been received in the past few years.*

Methods

Sample

One hundred twenty-seven students from three institutions in the Appalachian region were surveyed about their experiences related to higher education. The institutions included a mid-sized university in eastern Kentucky, a small university in southern Ohio, and a branch campus of a mid-sized university in central southern Ohio. The student population was fairly diverse in terms of age, class rank, and income levels (see Table 1). *Appalachian individuals* were defined as individuals who spent their formative years (ages 0-11) living in an Appalachian region (Massey, 1981). Ninety-one of the 127 participants (71.7%) were considered of Appalachian descent.

Survey

The survey was administered during class time, filled out anonymously, and returned to the researcher (see Appendix A). Students were asked about their views on student retention and included in the questionnaires were several items asking about the verbal and nonverbal messages that they personally had received regarding their pursuit of a college degree. Specifically, eleven items on the survey describe negative messages related to college attendance. Examples of the negative messages range from fairly innocuous statements such as "I have been ignored when I talk about college experiences" to extremely negative statements such as "I have been physically hurt for voicing a desire to attend or for attending college." Eight items on the survey, with an established reliability coefficient of .81, were used to measure locus of control (Harris, 1998).

Data Analysis

The intent of this preliminary study was to obtain a simple descriptive view of communication in the Appalachian culture as it related to higher education. Frequency distributions were used to determine the most commonly encountered discouraging messages, the primary source of the messages, the negative responses received by males and females, and the period of time in which they were received.

Table 1: Demographics of participants in the study

Participants	Frequency reported	Percentage
Total in study	127	100
Appalachian individuals	91	71.7
Non-Appalachian individuals	36	28.3
Sex of participant		
Female	90	70.9
Male	37	29.1
Age of participant		
16-18 years	7	5.5
19-21 years	60	47.2
22-25 years	22	17.3
26-30 years	17	13.4
31-35 years	5	3.9
36-45 years	11	8.7
46-older	5	3.9
Race of participant		
Caucasian/ white	120	94.5
Black/ African American	5	3.9
Hispanic	1	.8
Native American	1	.8
Class rank of participant		
First year student	29	22.8
Sophomore	31	24.4
Junior	32	25.2
Senior	35	27.6
Income level of participant's family		
Less than $18,000	38	29.9
$18,001-25,000	11	8.7
$25,001-35,000	10	7.9
$35,001-50,000	33	26.0
More than $50,000	32	25.2
Unreported	3	2.4

Results

An overview of the results indicates that students from Appalachian cultures are exposed to discouraging messages regarding the pursuit of higher education. Specifically, women have more often been exposed to such messages with the majority of messages being related to expected workload, and the messages originated with family.

RQ1 asked which types of discouraging messages were most commonly encountered by Appalachian students. Being expected to do extra work that often kept him/her from completing schoolwork seemed to be the most common message encountered with 50.5% of Appalachian students reporting that they had received that message. One in four, 25.3%, reported having been accused of "acting better" than others who did not attend college. See Table 2 for the full frequency report of messages received by Appalachian students.

Hypothesis 1 stated that the majority of messages would originate with the students' own families. Reported messages from family members comprised 52.5% of the total messages received. The next highest category was messages received from friends, 21.0%, followed by work-related messages with 13.9%, and finally a nonspecific "other" category with 12.6% of the total messages received.

Table 2: Discouraging Messages

Message received	Frequency reported	Percentage
I am expected to do extra work that keeps me from having time to complete college assignments (either at home or work).	46	50.5%
I have been accused of acting "better than" others who don't attend college.	23	25.3%
I have been ignored when I talk about college experiences.	22	24.2%
I have been told I shouldn't waste my time on college.	21	23.1%
I have received dirty looks when I talk about college.	19	20.9%
I have been told that I will never complete my degree.	18	19.8%
I have been told that I should pursue more appropriate goals than college (e.g., getting a job or getting married instead).	15	16.5%
I have been told that I could make more money without a college education.	12	13.2%
I have been made fun of for wanting to get a college degree.	11	12.1%
I have been verbally threatened for voicing a desire to attend or for attending college.	7	7.7%
I have been physically hurt for voicing a desire to attend or for attending college.	1	1.1%

Hypothesis 2 stated that females would receive more discouraging messages than males. The data showed that women received 72.3% and men received 27.7% of the discouraging messages regarding the pursuit of higher education. The only message that was received more often by males was the message that they could make more money without a college education.

Hypothesis 3 stated that Appalachians who were attending college would have an internal locus of control. The statistical range of possible scores on the items measuring locus of control was 19.0 with 21.0 being the minimum possible score and 40.0 being the maximum possible score. Students who fell on the high end of the range were considered to have an internal locus of control (Harris, 1998). The statistical mean was 34.47 (SD 4.11). Evidence seems to point in the direction of internal loci of control.

Table 3: Sources of Messages

Source	Number of messages	Percentage of total
Family	192	52.5%
Friends	77	21.0%
Work	51	13.9%
Other	46	12.6%
	366	100%

The final hypothesis stated that fewer discouraging messages would have been received in the past few years. On the survey, when marking that they had received a discouraging message, students were asked to give the time period in which it was given. Choices were within the last five years or more than five years ago. Students could choose either or both responses. The data did not support the hypothesis: 84.9% of the messages were received in the last five years and 27.1% were received more than five years ago.

Discussion

Appalachian areas range from northeast Mississippi to southwest New York (Wenger, 1998); however, this study was limited to two states that border the edges of Appalachia. Obviously, one cannot use a sampling of students in a part of Appalachia and make claims about the diverse population within the Appalachian region. More importantly, studies of Appalachia should "describe and analyze the social conditions found therein in order to both build knowledge and correct injustices" (Ergood & Kuhre, 1991, p.2). This study was designed to be a preliminary investigative look at some issues related to the pursuit of higher education.

Unfortunately, the only hypothesis that was not given any support was the final hypothesis, which suggested that a change might be occurring in the cultural mindset and that negative messages about education might be becoming a thing of the past. We are still hopeful though that change is taking place and that perhaps it was the age groups surveyed that influenced the data here. A more sophisticated statistical analysis could address whether or not age was significant with regard to time period of messages received.

Some limitations to this study need to be addressed. As a pilot study, not all factors could be considered nor could all populations be surveyed. Which family members were sending the negative messages and were others in the family being supportive? Ford (1991) contended that Appalachian women generally held higher aspirations for their children than did Appalachian men. Also, within the institutions that were surveyed, there might be a significantly different response from the students who

had already dropped out of college. The thinking here was to reach students who had overcome negative messages and were enrolled in institutions of higher education, but a greater resource might be the individuals who have never attended and do not plan to attend college. The question to follow all of this research is "what can be done to overcome this situation?" Ergood and Kuhre (1991) argued that it would take at least one full generation of concentrated effort before the educational level of younger Appalachians could be raised to that of the national average. Obviously, we need to determine what many of these factors are and possibly how they can be changed. As individuals who have experienced and/or observed many of these discouraging messages, we are committed to answering some of these questions.

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Appendix A

Issues of Student Retention

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Please do not sign your name or in any way indicate your identity. All responses will be kept confidential. The results of this survey from three different universities are intended to demonstrate patterns and identify issues related to keeping students in school.

Please circle one response for each of the following questions:

1. **Age**: 16-18 19-21 22-25 26-30 31-35 36-45 46 & older

2. **Sex**: Female Male

3. **Race**: African American/Black Caucasian/White Hispanic
   Native American/Am. Indian Asian Other

4. **Ranking**: First year Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate student

5. **Number of years attending college** (even if not continuous):
   Less than two years Two to four years More than four years

6. **Status during regular school year**: Full time student Part time student

7. **Do your parents support you financially?** Yes No

8. **Annual family income range** (please give your own family if parents do not support you financially):
   Less than $18,000 $18,001-25,000 $25,001-35,000 $35,001-50,000 More than $50,000

9. **Father's level of education**:
   Elementary school High school diploma Some college Bachelor's degree Graduate degree

10. **Mother's level of education**:
    Elementary school High school diploma Some college Bachelor's degree Graduate degree

11. **Did you grow up in a one-parent or two-parent household?** One-parent Two-parent

12. **For the majority of your early childhood (0-11 years old) in what city, county, & state did you live?**

    _____
    (Town/ city) (County) (State)

13. **For the majority of your mother's early childhood (0-11 years old), in what city, county, & state did she live?**

    _____
    (Town/ city) (County) (State)

14. **For the majority of your father's early childhood (0-11 years old), in what city, county, & state did he live?**

    _____
    (Town/ city) (County) (State)

15. **What is your home town** (permanent residence)?

    _____
    (Town/ city) (County) (State)

16. **Have you ever considered dropping out of college?** Yes No

17. What have been the **three greatest obstacles** in completing your degree (rank in order of importance with the greatest obstacle listed as #1 and the least listed as #3)?

1-_____ 2-_____ 3-_____

Examples might include financial concerns, lack of personal motivation, difficulty of coursework, lack of support from family/friends, external influences (family, job, etc.), special needs not met by college, or any other obstacles.

18. **Have you felt that your family or friends would prefer that you did not attend college?** Never Occasionally Frequently

What types of behaviors have been used to show disapproval of you attending college?

Please circle the appropriate letter or number below for whether or not you have encountered this type of message, for the source of the message, and for when the message occurred. You may have more than one item circled for the source and for the time frame. The responses are as follows:

Message: Y = Yes, I have encountered this message N = No, I have not encountered this message
Source: Fa = Family Fr = Friends W = Work O = Other sources
Time Frame: < 5 = Happened in the past five years > 5 = Happened more than five years ago

		Message	Source	Time
19.	I have been told that I shouldn't waste my time on college.	Y N	Fa Fr W O	<5 >5
20.	I have received dirty looks when I talk about college.	Y N	Fa Fr W O	<5 >5
21.	I am expected to do extra work that keeps me from having time to complete college assignments (either at home or work).	Y N	Fa Fr W O	<5 >5
22.	I have been told that I will never complete my degree.	Y N	Fa Fr W O	<5 >5
23.	I have been accused of acting "better than" others who don't attend college.	Y N	Fa Fr W O	<5 >5
24.	I have been told that I should pursue more appropriate goals than college (e.g., getting a job or getting married instead).	Y N	Fa Fr W O	<5 >5
25.	I have been told that I could make more money without a college education.	Y N	Fa Fr W O	<5 >5
26.	I have been made fun of for wanting to get a college degree.	Y N	Fa Fr W O	<5 >5
27.	I have been ignored when I talk about college experiences.	Y N	Fa Fr W O	<5 >5
28.	I have been verbally threatened for voicing a desire to attend or for attending college.	Y N	Fa Fr W O	<5 >5
29.	I have been physically hurt for voicing a desire to attend or for attending college.	Y N	Fa Fr W O	<5 >5

30. What are your **three greatest motivations** to stay in school? (Rank these in order with #1 being the most important motivator and #3 being the least important):

1-_____ 2-_____ 3-_____

Examples might include the type of position that can be achieved with a degree, the pride and respect of family/friends, a sense of personal satisfaction, a desire to learn, or any other motivator.

Are you comfortable with the thought of		Yes	No
31.	Relocating after college?	—	—
32.	Finding a job after graduation?	—	—
33.	The interviewing process?	—	—
34.	"Proving" yourself in the workplace?	—	—

35. Providing for your financial future? ___ ___
36. Living up to the expectations of others? ___ ___

For this next section, please circle the number that corresponds most closely to how you feel about each statement. The responses are as follows:

1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Neutral
4 = Agree
5 = Strongly agree

37.	I have the power to achieve my educational goals.	1	2	3	4	5
38.	If I become unhappy with my life, I can do something to change it.	1	2	3	4	5
39.	When bad things happen, I can make the best of the situation.	1	2	3	4	5
40.	The good things that happen in my life are the result of my working to make them happen.	1	2	3	4	5
41.	Each person has the power to make life better or worse.	1	2	3	4	5
42.	My grades reflect how much my professors like me.	1	2	3	4	5
43.	I have no control over my future.	1	2	3	4	5
44.	No matter how hard I work I won't succeed at anything I do.	1	2	3	4	5

45. Please share any comments that might help the researchers understand why students at your university drop out of school, or why many of your friends or high school classmates decided not to attend college at all:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Thank you very much for your participation in this study.